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Energy Conservation for Cities and States

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During this winter season the 68 percent increase in the price of fuel oil has made us painfully aware of our dependence on foreign oil.

To counteract this increasing cost of energy, two things can be done: (1) increase energy production and (2) conserve and make better use of existing power resources. Increased production through new discoveries of fossil fuels and making greater use of renewable power sources, such as sun, wind and tides, will happen but it will be years before much of this technology can be developed for common use. And even with new finds of oil and gas we must realize that these are non-renewable energy sources whose life span is limited. The atom, of course, has sparked more controversy than power and its future use appears limited. Our goal must be conservation, a practice which will also have long term effects on our life styles.

The principal users of energy in this country are industry — 36 percent, transportation — 26 percent, residential — 21 percent and business — 17 percent. All of these sectors of the economy are now instituting measures to reduce energy use, and the profit-motivated industrial and business segment is working toward a "zero energy growth" — increased production without increased energy use.

In the areas of housing and transportation, neither of which is responsible to stockholders, more can be done. State and local governments, according to urban columnist Neal Peirce, have more to contribute here than the federal government because they have the power: to regulate utilities' rates and practices, to control zoning and land use, to regulate highway patterns, to build and control transit systems, to enact building codes, dispose of waste, and decide on siting of parks, schools and community centers. All of these decisions have profound effects in the patterns of daily life, work and movement, and thus in the amount of energy Americans actually use.

Some cities have already taken the lead in energy conservation. Portland, Oregon, for instance, has a plan in place that will reduce energy use by 30 percent at a saving of $162 million by 1995. Part of the plan is to require weatherization of all houses; by 1983 no homeowner will be allowed to sell his property unless he has made these energy-efficient improvements.

Another aspect of the plan is to control land use by encouraging compact housing (attached and multifamily) and concentrated developments of housing, retailing and offices, all of which would have access to public transportation.

Other cities have made extensive use of new financing instruments, building codes, tax incentives and technical assistance programs. Some noteworthy examples include Davis, California, which redesigned its building codes and zoning powers and effected a 12 percent reduction in electricity consumption in the first two years. Other energy savers utilized in Davis included "solar dryers" (clotheslines) for apartment houses, non-use of conventional fuels to heat swimming pools, landscaping for energy conservation, and encouraging residents to work close to their homes to reduce transportation.

In Seattle, nuclear power was rejected in favor of an aggressive strategy to promote better building codes and construction policies that will cut energy use by 20 percent. Other measures instituted by cities include: solar energy water heaters in new construction in San Diego county; processing 150 tons of garbage a day in Ames, Iowa, to provide electricity for 65,000 residents; a wood burning utility in Burlington, Vt; and using block grant money to weatherize and conserve in numerous cities including Boston, Spokane, Washington, Evanston, Illinois, and York, Pennsylvania.

With these city energy programs comes a unique job-creating potential. Weatherization, solar installation and other measures provide jobs for the city dwellers, and cities themselves are developing an expertise in energy-efficient office buildings, small hydropower plant construction and other energy-related activities, all of which can develop into an export market.

Residential energy conservation represents the most immediate cost-effective approach to reducing energy costs in our cities, according to Donna Shalala, Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research at HUD. Whether this operates on existing housing (as the TVA has done in Memphis in cooperation with a local utility in the installation of solar heaters) or in changing zoning ordinances to cluster new housing (as in Portland) the goal of energy conservation should be immediately applied to housing. Cities have it within their powers to effect such changes. In addition to measures carried out by cities, there are strategies and programs that can be instituted by the state, especially is this true in a small state such as Rhode Island.

Measures already proposed here by Governor Garrahy include sales tax exemptions on energy related equipment, income tax credits, grants, property tax relief and others. But probably the most effective measure that could be accomplished by the General Assembly this session is to adopt the land management bill. Not only does this measure attempt to bring some order to development in the state but it could have a marked impact on energy use by relating certain job generating developments with available nearby housing and public transport. This was done in Oregon in 1973 when the state plan established urban growth boundaries and all development was designated to take place within selected zones. The purpose: to prevent urban sprawl — common in this state, and "one of America's most notorious wasters of energy," according to Rep. Henry Reuss, chairman of the subcommittee on the city.

As a long-term measure this state should institute an energy tax to provide funding for more public transit operations and such energy-related activities. This can be done by increasing the 10 cents per gallon state tax on gasoline.

Based on gasoline prices of one year ago, the tax represented 15 percent of the price of a gallon of gasoline; today, this same 10 cents is equal to only eight percent of the price. This is a source of revenue that needs to be utilized for greater public energy efficiency.

Cities and state working together have the power to institute effective energy conservation practices, more effectively and faster than can the bureaucratically snarled federal government. This is both an opportunity and challenge that will affect the lives of all of us: done effectively, it can provide a continuously good life; done ineffectively, it can lead us to disaster. Now is the time for strong and effective leadership and resourcefulness in the field of energy conservation.

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